

**Figures in Focus. A study of returns from the Focus
Cinemas Sevenoaks, 1977-79**

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Figures in Focus

A study of returns from the Focus Cinemas Sevenoaks, 1977-79

By Sheldon Hall and students of Sheffield Hallam University

In 2019, I was approached by John V. Watson with a collection of documents he had preserved from the time when he managed the three-screen Focus Cinemas complex in Sevenoaks, Kent. The documents mainly comprised carbon copies of Weekly Analysis & Business Reports (or 'returns'), completed by John himself with the top copy being sent on to Focus head office, along with other financial data and business correspondence pertaining to his nineteen-month stewardship of the venue between November 1977 and May 1979. The initial proposal was that, using these return sheets as source material, I should write an article for this journal similar to one that I had previously contributed on patterns of film programming, attendance and audience response at the Gaumont Sheffield ('Going to the Gaumont', PICTURE HOUSE no. 42, 2018).

I was unable to make a start on the article straight away and in any case the documents posed a number of difficulties. The dataset covered a relatively short period compared to the similar return sheets that I had used for the Sheffield article, which had spanned eleven and a half years and a total of 600 weeks. And, unlike that collection, the Sevenoaks material was incomplete: from the eighty weeks covered by the Focus returns, fourteen of the sheets were missing, leaving large gaps in the records. Moreover, not all the important information present on the surviving 66 sheets was legible; nor was the data complete for all the relevant fields. Nevertheless, there was much of interest in the documents and I resolved to press on with the project when I could.

Cut to a year later, and a new opportunity presented itself. As a lecturer in film studies at Sheffield Hallam University, I was due to teach a new module entitled Film Consumption, involving the study of historical film audiences, distribution and exhibition. It occurred to me that the Sevenoaks material could serve as the ideal basis for a collaborative research project in which the students – all in their first year of degree courses in Film Studies and Screenwriting & Film – would learn through practice the unique insights that could be gained from examining and interpreting primary sources, as well as coming to understand the particular challenges such sources pose for the historian. In this regard, the problematic nature of the material as a dataset could be turned to positive advantage. Recognising through experience the limitations as well as the richness of primary sources would thus be a positive outcome for the students and provide an object lesson in the hazards as well as the rewards of conducting real-world research using archival sources.

With the necessary institutional approvals (including a research ethics review) in place, and with the agreement of both John and PICTURE HOUSE editor Allen Eyles on the approach I proposed for the article, I developed a practical plan for making the collaborative project work – the collaboration being remote, of course, in the era of Covid 19. The thirty students taking the module were placed in self-selected groups of two or three, and each group was assigned a small batch of return sheets (between four and eight per group) covering a consecutive run of weeks, albeit with some gaps in chronology as previously noted. All the documents were made accessible online as electronic scans – the same form in which they had been provided to me – via the university's secure Virtual Learning Environment. The number of documents each group was allocated was based partly on the amount of information the sheets contained: some, especially in the earlier part of the period covered, carried lengthy written reports by John in his capacity as manager whereas the later ones had briefer reports but, often, more detailed figures. My aim was to ensure that all twelve student groups faced a roughly similar level of challenge, though the uneven nature of the material meant that the types of challenge might vary between groups and of course each group would be looking at a different run of weeks.

At the end of the module, each student wrote up their own report on the documents their group had been assigned, assessment of which earned them credit. The article that follows, though it includes supplementary research done by me to provide additional background context not available from the documents alone, draws substantially on these reports and is therefore as much the product of the students as the nominal author. The names of all the students working on the project are listed at the end of the article and the authors of specific quoted contributions are identified. I have made minor

corrections but the words quoted are substantially the students' own. Other quotations are from the return sheets themselves, identified by date, which stand exactly as originally written. The students had been informed in advance that their work might be used as the basis of an article and given the option of non-participation; after its completion they had the opportunity to review and amend or withdraw their contribution if they preferred (no-one did). In addition, comments made by John Watson after he had reviewed a draft of the article have been interpolated at certain points in the text; these appear in square brackets and italics, preceded by the initials JVW.

A number of students made similar observations or drew similar conclusions from the return sheets they analysed, even when they had been working in different groups and therefore looking at different weeks, which suggests a degree of consensus on certain issues cutting across the entire collection of documents. Reflective comments that many of the students made in their reports, selections from which form the last section of the article, suggest that the project had achieved its intended aim of giving them hands-on practice of conducting primary research as well as gaining insight into a period of cinema history – the late 1970s – very different from the one familiar to young people, most of whom were born in the twenty-first century. Lectures and seminars on the module aimed to provide background knowledge of this earlier era, but it seemed to me that the experience of handling materials actually dating from that period gave the students a more vivid understanding of just how different it was from the modern cinema experience that they may previously have taken for granted as the norm.

The Cinema and Its Owners

Designed by architect George Coles, the Majestic cinema, located in London Road, Sevenoaks, opened on 22 August 1936 with a capacity of around 1,600 seats (a single auditorium on two levels). It was taken over by the Rank Organisation's Odeon circuit on 23 August 1943 and renamed the Odeon on 2 July 1945. By 1956, seating had been reduced to 1,442 and by 1965 to 1,367. In the early 1970s single-screen theatres were increasingly deemed uneconomic and the Odeon's auditorium was 'tripled' with a 'drop-wall' conversion, re-opening as a three-screen complex (or 'triplex') on 24 December 1972. Seating capacity was 457 in Screen 1 (the former balcony area), 102 in Screen 2 and 106 in Screen 3 (underneath the balcony). The conversion did not improve business and on 26 October 1975 the cinemas were taken over by Brent Walker and renamed Focus 1, 2 and 3.ⁱ

Brent Walker was a leisure group owned by two brothers, former Billingsgate fish porter George Walker and ex-boxer William (Billy) Walker. It had interests in such varied fields as taxi cabs, sports clubs and stadiums, leisure centres, casinos, restaurants, public houses and whisky distilleries. In 1972 the company branched out into the film industry, opening a small cinema in Soho's Brewer Street on 28 September; initially called Oscar 1, this was renamed Focus 1 on 11 April 1974. Two other mini-cinemas, Oscar 2 and 3 (renamed Focus 2 and 3 on the same date as Focus 1), were opened in a different building on the same street on 21 June 1973 but were sold to other interests on 1 July 1974, while Focus 1 was sold in early 1976, all again being renamed. They appear to have been the only cinemas operated by Brent Walker in London's West End until 9 March 1977, when the company took over control of the Rialto Coventry Street from Twentieth Century-Fox. Its lease lasted until 9 January 1982, when the Rialto closed as a cinema.ⁱ

Besides its exhibition interests, from 1974 the company also became involved in film distribution and production. Focus Film Distributors, headed by Alan Kean (also chief of the exhibition circuit) and subsequently renamed Brent Walker Film Distributors, specialised in exploitation product. Striking a deal to release the films of American International Pictures (AIP) in the UK, it had considerable early success with *Death Race 2000* (1975). Among the British films it released were *Ain't Misbehavin'* (1975), *Intimate Reflections* (1975), *Emily* (1976), *The Face of Darkness* (1976), *Satan's Slave* (1976), *The People That Time Forgot* (1977), *Big Banana Feet* (1977), *The Bitch* (1979), *Quadrophenia* (1979), *McVicar* (1980), *Inseminoid* (1981), *Brimstone and Treacle* (1982) and *Fanny Hill* (1983). Brent Walker Film Productions produced or co-produced *The Stud* (1978), *Loophole* (1981), *Smokey Bites the Dust* (1981), *Treasure Island – The Musical* (1982) – the latter two unreleased in UK cinemas – and *The Return of the Soldier* (1982), as well as a series of Gilbert and Sullivan adaptations intended for television and

home video. Brent Walker also acquired Goldcrest Films in 1987 and Elstree Studios in 1988 before the group ceased trading in 1997.ⁱⁱ

The Odeon Sevenoaks was one of six cinemas acquired by Brent Walker from the Rank Organisation in 1975: the others were the Odeons at Bury St. Edmunds, Crewe, Hereford and Grimsby, and the Gaumont South Shields. These were all renamed Focus Cinemas and all were subsequently sold on, repurposed, closed or demolished. In 1982 the Sevenoaks cinemas were taken over by another independent circuit and renamed Ace 1, 2 and 3 – then sold again to a community group for use as a live performance venue, which was named the Stag Theatre. After failing as a commercial venture, the building was eventually taken over by the district council in 1991, becoming a multi-purpose venue and undergoing several transformations. The former Screen 1 remained in use only for live performances, while the smaller auditoria resumed operation as cinemas in February 2009. The Stag Community Arts Centre is still operating today after being forced to close temporarily by the Covid 19 lockdown in 2020.

The Town and the Locality

Sevenoaks is a commuter town situated in north Kent, around twenty miles' distance from central London. Although figures from the 1981 census indicate that its population then was 109,800, this includes the surrounding district, the urban centre being much smaller.ⁱ The Stag's current website claims a town population of only 19,000 in the mid-1980s and the census for 2001 cites 29,506 people then living in the 'built-up area'.ⁱⁱⁱ

The demographics of Sevenoaks in the period with which we are concerned, the late 1970s, are more difficult to specify but the 2011 census includes the following breakdown of occupations: 'Professional 19.2%, Associate professional and technical 14.5%, Managers, directors and senior officials 14.4%, Administrative and secretarial 12.7%, Skilled trades 11.7%, Corporate managers and directors 10.0%, Administrative 8.6%, Business and public service associate professionals 8.3%, Caring, leisure and other service 8.0%, Elementary 7.7%'. We can surmise, then, that the local population was and is predominantly comprised of middle-class, white-collar workers. There was a relatively small minority-ethnic population, with Kent as a whole being 93.7% White in 1981 and Sevenoaks 95.7% White in 2011.^{iv}

Focus manager John Watson gave his own view on the demographic makeup of the town and its relevance to the cinema in one of his weekly reports: 'Sevenoaks, it appears, is a very mixed community with quite a distinct division – there are the "executive" and "county" types at the top of the hill, and the 'others' at the bottom of the hill. It appears to me in the short time I have been here that we draw the greater majority of our patronage from the 'others' half of the Sevenoaks populace' (3 December 1977).

The cinema struggled to recruit and retain staff, two doormen leaving after only a week in their jobs. By June 1978, 23 new employees had been taken on in the 22 weeks since the start of the year, yet the Focus still had to advertise for part-time staff in the local press in most weeks. The manager attributed this situation to the high rate of taxation on part-time earnings coupled with the uncompetitive wages the cinema offered – only 70p an hour compared to upwards of £1 an hour typically paid for domestic cleaning in the Sevenoaks area. One report noted that the town had a 'very high employment rate, and there are a lot of job vacancies in the area that go unfilled', so the cinema was not able to compete successfully in the local jobs market (3 June 1978). [JVW: *Not to labour the point, but it was truly a nightmare to recruit staff to help run the cinema triples. I do not ever remember having a full complement of staff.*]

The nearest cinemas providing potential competition for the Focus were the Classic Tunbridge Wells, the Ritz Tonbridge, the Plaza Oxted and the Raymar in West Malling. Table 1 indicates the comparative size of the towns based on urban population figures for 1969, derived from the *Kinematograph and Television Year Book* for that year, and the seating capacities of the cinemas.^v The weekly return sheets for Sevenoaks usually listed the main programmes for each of these competing cinemas and often commented on the business done by them, though the source of this information (possibly personal contacts) is unclear.^{vi} [JVW: *I probably obtained this information from the manager himself.*]

At time of writing, the Plaza Oxted is still open for business, the other cinemas all having closed. The large, single-screen Ritz Tonbridge closed midway through the period covered by the sheets, being taken over by President Theatres on 18 March 1978. The Ritz closed on 15 April and a later report (6 May 1978) mentions a rumour that the supermarket chain Bejam was to open a shop on the site, with provision for a small cinema utilising 16mm projection. When the building reopened in August with a cinema in the former restaurant area it seated only 98. The Focus sheets refer to this as the President but other sources claim that the venue was named the Carlton.^{vii}

However, Sevenoaks' principal competitor was the Classic Tunbridge Wells. Like the Focus, it was a three-screen complex and part of a chain (in its case, Classic Cinemas through its takeover of the Essoldo chain).^{viii} Because neither the Focus nor the Classic had direct competition from an Odeon or an ABC cinema in the locality, their bookers were able to select programmes from both major circuits' regular release schedules as well as put together their own programmes.

The booker for the Focus chain was Len Sterling, based at the company's head office in Chesterfield Road, London. In a letter to John Watson, Sterling explained the awkward position the cinemas were in for release schedules because of their location close to London: 'we are still trying to establish a hard and fast pattern for Sevenoaks. Some Renters contend we are South London release, while others contend we are concurrent Tunbridge Wells. Very difficult to establish!' (17 March 1978).

Competition

No doubt because it served a larger population centre and was part of a much larger circuit, as well as having a slightly greater seating capacity, the Classic Tunbridge Wells often seems to have been given priority over the Focus in the booking of major attractions. Sevenoaks' audience therefore often had to wait for Tunbridge Wells' runs to finish before seeing the same films. [JVW: *If memory serves me correctly, I think the Classic Tunbridge Wells barred us at Sevenoaks as a general principle.*]

Noting that when the Focus played its first week of *The Deep* (1977), it was already in its third week at the Classic, Rokhaya Thioub commented: 'The cinema offered to its public a variety of popular movies, even though sometimes they were offered later than the other cinema'. Mae Roberts said of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977): 'As it was initially released in the US almost four months prior to its Sevenoaks premiere, there is no doubt that excitement surrounding the film from across the pond would have positively impacted its UK box office results. The film would presumably have been even more of a triumph for the Focus were it not also in its first week at the rival Classic Cinema in Tunbridge Wells'.

Macy Savage remarked: 'Both cinemas showed more or less the same films in the same week and if not they showed similar films. For example, when Focus Sevenoaks was showing *The Cat from Outer Space* (a Disney film [1978]), Tunbridge Wells showed *Watership Down* [1978], which is an animation, so despite the two cinemas showing different films they are both catering to a younger audience, thus fuelling competition between them'. Leah Park also noted that these cinemas 'were not remarkably different' in their choice of programme: 'a majority of the time the same film was played at one or more cinemas, and could have impacted each other's sales'. Jack Earnshaw observed: 'Other cinemas in the area did not appear to vary too much from the types of films shown regarding new big releases however it varied regarding their own re-runs and other lesser-known films that came out around that time'.

The Classic played *Star Wars* (1977) for a full ten weeks before it came to Sevenoaks, apparently skimming off much of the cream, despite the Focus having received many public enquiries asking when it would be shown. Georgia Maddock commented: 'Despite the present [twenty-first century] love of *Star Wars*, the first week of showing did not achieve one full house. Takings did increase over Easter and decreased again in the final two weeks of showing. The manager believed this to be a result of over-selling'. The film also had to contend with sunny weather in its opening fortnight, which included a bank holiday weekend. Unfortunately, it is not possible to say how well *Star Wars* did overall in Sevenoaks, or even exactly how long it ran, as the two return sheets following its third week are missing. However, the film had not come up to expectations in its Tunbridge Wells run either, only taking 'big money' there from its third week, at Easter, and tailing off badly in its last weeks (27 May 1978).

Tunbridge Wells had an eight-week head start with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), despite assurances from Focus head office that the film would open concurrently in both towns. In its fifth week at the Classic the film was reportedly 'ticking along' but 'apparently not breaking any records' due to good weather (10 June 1978). On the other hand, the Academy Award winner *The Goodbye Girl* (1977) actually played Sevenoaks two weeks ahead of Tunbridge Wells, doing good business for the Focus as a result. This was repeated in a subsequent week's second run, despite fine weather.

When not only Tunbridge Wells but even Oxted played *Watership Down* before Sevenoaks, a report remarked indignantly on 'the shame and the insult of it all' (4 November 1978). News that the Ritz Tonbridge might also be playing the film ahead of the Focus was regarded as 'a good case for getting a reduction in terms' from the distributor, Cinema International Corporation (CIC) (25 November 1978). When *Watership Down* was finally available, the circuit booker had the film pencilled in for Screen 3 because of its extensive prior exposure in the region. But the Sevenoaks manager pointed that out it had done 'extremely well' and advised holding it back for a holiday period when it could play in Screen 1 (13 January 1979). This turned out to be at Easter 1979, and while the return sheet for its first week is missing the following week's report confirms that it had done well in Screen 1. The film's second week gave Screen 2 its biggest single tally of the period, with 1,658 admissions – a figure that would have been extremely good even for Screen 1 – but not holding it in the big screen for a second week cost the cinema 'a good £1000-worth of business' (14 April 1979). When the film was brought back for a return run for a Bank Holiday week it was in Screen 1, where it achieved excellent results with 2,140 admissions.

Maya Lambert noted that this showed 'how the community supports their local cinema, compared to the present where viewers would rather go to another cinema to see the film that they are interested in than wait and support the local one'. Martha Bones commented that as the cinema was most likely attended largely by local patrons, 'it was crucial for the staff to pay attention to the audience's complaints/needs/enquiries. If they failed to do this, it would be easy to lose customers to their competitors in Tunbridge Wells (an 18-minute drive away). Sevenoaks' cinema operation must have possessed a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere because they had regular consumers'.

Focus Cinemas' greatest success in the period covered by the returns was the unbroken nine-week run of *Grease* (1978). The first two weeks brought Screen 1 its two highest admission and gross figures for the period, although the return sheet for the first week is missing and the exact figures cannot be confirmed. The second week recorded 3,212 admissions and a net of £2,481, which 'was not all that behind the result achieved for the first week'. The manager exhorted head office to hold the film over 'for at the very least two more weeks in Screen 3', and his advice not to break the momentum of a continuing run was heeded (30 September 1978). *Grease* in fact ran for three weeks in Screen 2 and four in Screen 3, earning the smaller auditoria some of their best results also. For once a Sevenoaks engagement outlasted its rival in Tunbridge Wells, which ran only eight weeks.

Ellie Scholey-Strzala commented: 'A lot of the films played at other cinemas were not shown at Sevenoaks. This makes us think about the film selection process for cinemas. Many of the films played exclusively at one of the rival cinemas rarely seemed to be shown again, as if to suggest that anomaly decisions to show a different film seldom paid off. We can see this from solo screenings of *An Unmarried Woman* [1978] and *International Velvet* [1978]. Of course, audience response is also crucial in determining screenings. From the admissions for *Grease*, it is clear to see why it ran for nine weeks as well as being played at other cinemas for weeks at a time'.

Jack Stocks added: 'I found this specific trend of delaying release dates to be the most intriguing thing, due to the competition of other cinemas. While there are still occasions of certain cinemas playing different kinds of films to appeal to different audiences, the idea of delaying big blockbusters is something that is hardly, if not ever, seen anymore [today]. The biggest exception to this was *Grease* where every cinema [in the region] was playing the film all at once, instead of waiting for the other cinemas to stop playing it. From a business perspective this does make sense though; the longer they have to wait to release the film in their cinema (so as to not conflict), the more likely it is that the hype towards the film dies down and consequently affects the numbers'.

Family Films and Special Shows

A recurrent theme in the return sheets is the notion of Sevenoaks as a 'family town'. Business surged in holiday weeks, with the playing of Disney and Disney-type films attracting large audiences. A revival of *The Jungle Book* (1967) proved a sell-out success even in a non-holiday week, although this 'was by far one of Disney's most popular cartoons – and it may be that a lesser Disney might not have done so well' (4 February 1978). But a new Disney film, *Candlehoe* (1977), coupled with another animated classic, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), performed even more strongly, drawing not only 2,856 admissions to Screen 1 but also earning excellent house sales of £636, almost doubling the take for the same week the previous year (8 April 1978).

Mae Roberts commented: 'The manager remarked on the week's report that "children are excellent spenders", as well as mentioning in multiple other documents that Disney films should only be booked for Focus 1 as this screen had the highest capacity and Disney films were always expected to do well. This suggests that families and young children constituted a significant portion of this cinema's customer base'. Yet when the same programme was later rebooked for Whit week, it was only in Screen 2, contrary to the manager's advice. In the event, a spell of sunny weather meant that this return visit did very poorly even in the small screen (3 June 1978).

Ralph Whittall observed 'that one thing has stayed the same since 1977: Disney films are still expected to be a smash hit. Indeed the manager consistently comments on the competing cinemas' decision to open on Boxing Day, and each time seems surprised by the poor figures, writing at one point "with a Disney at that!" This surprised reaction implies that even in 1977 a Disney film seemed to guarantee some level of success for cinemas, and attracted a wider crowd'. Rokhaya Thioub concurred that 'Disney just like today was a powerhouse' and George Hopkins noted: 'You could argue that Disney's household name played a large role in increasing admissions'. Leah Park pointed out that *Shipwreck!* (1978) is also a children's film, yet didn't do nearly as well as *The Cat from Outer Space*, confirming that Disney drew in the audience, rather than the film itself'. A notable non-Disney family film which attracted patrons away from the genuine article – a reissue of *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960) – was *The Adventures of the Wilderness Family* (1975). This seems to demonstrate not just the strength of Disney but also, as Connor Jones put it, 'the power of having a film that parents would feel comfortable taking their children to see'.

In order to reach the local family audience that was neglected in non-holiday weeks, when the cinema would often be playing films with restrictive certificates, the manager proposed introducing regular children's matinees on Saturday afternoons. The first attempt at a special family show – a double bill of *Snow White* (*Schneewittchen und die sieben Zwerge*, 1955) and *Hansel and Gretel* (*Hänsel und Gretel*, 1954) – was a big success, drawing 344 admissions to Screen 1. As Grace Kilroy pointed out, the weekly report stated 'that more shows like this in the future would help the numbers of admissions and create success, especially when the rest of the programme for a week consists of X- and AA-rated films. However the manager also noted that they would not advocate this kind of programme during school holidays as it would take away from the usual Disney screening'. [JVW: *It was obviously financially prudent for renters and cinemas to reserve the exhibition of family films to the school holidays! We did just that at Star when I was film booking executive for them from 1969.*]

Despite this early success, subsequent Saturday matinees proved disappointing, for which the returns offered several explanations, including the time of year – the traditional 'pre-Christmas lull'. However, as Will Holt Price commented, 'another reason is potentially that customers had felt "conned" at that first showing. As the manager puts it in the week 50 report: "Hemdale's *Snow White* was generally thought to be the Disney version"; as a result, it is possible that patrons felt they had been cheated at this family event and therefore chose not to return in subsequent weeks. The manager also states that a third potential reason for the drop off is that the information of the family event's existence simply hadn't spread around the town yet: "I have spoken to a great many enquiring mothers over the telephone all this week and, when they asked for children's films showing this week, I naturally drew their attention to the fact that we have Saturday Family Shows now on a fairly regular basis. Not one of these women were aware of this new service at all!" Another comment that the manager makes in regard to the family event is that "The Sevenoaks council, so I am informed, receive quite a few

complaints about the overall type of film we show here. It is very much a family community here and we should therefore market accordingly. I am, of course, very well aware that there is a very high proportion of films carrying either 'X' or 'AA' certificates". For this reason the manager makes it clear that the family event should continue to be held often, as there is a market for it as proven by the show on 26 November, and that it should provide the cinema with "a healthy increase at the Box Office" by improving the cinema's standing with the local townspeople'.

In the absence of a regular flow of suitable product from commercial sources, the manager proposed using only titles from the Children's Film Foundation for family shows in the 39 non-holiday weeks of the year, despite the fact that CFF, as a non-profit organisation, insisted on placing an upper limit on ticket prices. A report pointed out that 'a reasonably full Screen 1 on Saturday Afternoons at reduced prices must surely be better than a relatively empty Screen 1 at full prices!!!' (7 January 1978). The first of these bookings was a modest success, selling 156 admissions and doing well with theatre sales. The show received good local newspaper coverage and drew favourable comments from patrons (4 March 1978). But many people apparently still either did not take the local paper or failed to realise that Focus Cinemas advertised in it (15 April 1978). When a number of patrons arrived to see a matinee of *Sweeney 2* (1978) and were informed that a special children's show was playing instead, their response was to the effect: 'Oh! How long have you been running these?' (29 April 1978).

After steadily decreasing business (including one show with only nine admissions), the family matinees were dropped in July 1978 and apparently never resumed, despite a recommendation that they be brought back in the autumn (10 June 1978). Connor Jones thought that the children's matinee 'may have been ended due to the lack of serious income it brought into the theatre'. Ethan Basford also commented on 'how consistently unsuccessfully the children's matinee performed. It was clearly disruptive for business as on the report from the week ending 10 June 1978 the manager stated that the cinema would be discontinuing the children's matinee, which was something he was very pleased about. This was likely due to a low percentage of children in the local area or perhaps the children that did live in the area simply were not interested in visiting the cinema, meaning the target audience for the matinee was slim. Unfortunately, the children's matinee film titles were never revealed in the cinema reports, therefore it would be impossible to assume that the poor admissions were due to a lack of interest in specific pictures'.

Besides the family shows, a schools performance of *Wuthering Heights* (1970) was arranged for 18 May 1978, with advance publicity circulated to schools in the area (15 April 1978). Unfortunately, the return sheet for this week has not survived so we cannot be sure of how well the educational show did.

Adult, Art-house and Upmarket Films

Horror films generally performed poorly at the Focus, especially by comparison with the Classic Tunbridge Wells, where the genre seemed to do better business. For example, *Suspiria* (1977) drew only 298 patrons to its single week in Focus Screen 1, whereas the same film was held over for a second week at the Classic. The manager's report pointed out that this 'certainly indicates the audience in Sevenoaks require different screen entertainment to their neighbours in Tunbridge Wells'. He therefore recommended avoiding the genre except for 'the "class" pictures like *The Exorcist* and that ilk' (12 November 1977).

Brett Marsden commented: 'The manager's thesis on horror pictures in his town is reinforced by the data from the following three weeks. In the week ending 19 November, the Screen 3 programme, consisting of *The House of Exorcism* (1973) (horror) and *The Getaway* (1972) (action/crime), performed disastrously compared to the other two shows. It produced a Sunday to Saturday net taking almost three times less than that of Screen 2 and almost four times less than that of Screen 1. The double horror feature of *Communion* (1976) and *Tintorera* (1977) was also the worst performing show of the week ending 26 November. Sevenoaks' manager remarks that "the *Death Weekend* programme still produced the usual poor response at the box office" and that that was to be expected with "this type of product in Sevenoaks"'.

There were occasional exceptions, however. Noah Dolan noted that *The Fury* (1978) 'did far better than expected' in Screen 1, which led him to realise that the manager did not 'have total control

over what films are shown on what screen and also lets us know that he might not understand his audience as much as he seems to suggest in his previous reports’.

As previously noted, the manager considered that the cinemas’ general reputation was partly to blame for the disappointing business done by family shows, reporting that ‘there definitely appears to be a view amongst Sevenoaks people that we quite often do not provide the product on the screen that they want to see’ (17 December 1977). The same return cited two forthcoming bookings, *For Men Only* (*Bel Ami*, 1976) and *Private Vices & Public Virtues* (*Vizi privati, pubbliche virtù*, 1976), as examples of problematic fare, and remarked: ‘surely we can avoid these bookings (specially the former) and therefore help improve our image!’ (17 December 1977). *For Men Only* did not ultimately play Sevenoaks and the planned supporting feature for *Private Vices*, *Till Sex Us Do Part* (*Troll*, 1971) was also withdrawn. Lauren Eady remarked that the latter had ‘been taken out due to the provocative nature of the title. With Sevenoaks being a predominately family town, the image of the town and cinema could potentially have been damaged’. When *Private Vices* was shown, it was reported that ‘for an “up-market” product it certainly attracted a down-beat audience!’ (11 February 1978). In fact, despite their titillating UK titles, both *Private Vices & Public Virtues* and *Till Sex Us Do Part* were art films from directors with critically impeccable reputations (Miklós Jancsó and Vilgot Sjöman, respectively), whose British distributor, Eagle, preferred to treat them as sexploitation items.

Another report questioned the wisdom of booking the British sex comedy *Come Play with Me* (1977), asking ‘is it worth playing this type of picture in a place like Sevenoaks, which can only hinder our rising image?’ (18 February 1978). Samatha Visakha commented that Classic Tunbridge Wells seemed not to ‘have so much of an issue with playing more adult-oriented films, showing not one but two raunchy films in one week, with one of them quite literally being soft-core erotica’. This made Samatha think that the Classic and the Focus, ‘despite being competitors, seem to have a completely different target audience as shown by the differences in the types of films they decide to screen, with Classic Tunbridge Wells seeming to aim for a more mature audience in contrast to the families that Focus Cinemas targeted’. In the event, the performance of *Come Play with Me* was ‘below average’, without the queuing expected on Friday and Saturday nights (18 March 1978).

The manager suggested experimenting with late shows, while avoiding ‘the outright sex variety’ (5 November 1977). Noah Dolan noted how this also differed from the rival cinemas: ‘Another one of Sevenoaks’ competitors, the Ritz Tonbridge, frequently played late shows of films such as *Secrets of a Door-to-Door Salesman* and *Girls Come First*; this was definitely not an element that Sevenoaks could compete in as it might taint their family-friendly brand to show such films’.

Nevertheless, *Goodbye Emmanuelle* (1977) did surprisingly well in Screen 3 and the Jackie Collins adaptation *The Stud* (1978), opening in Screen 1, was very successful, though one report noted with chagrin that an advertisement, placed by the distributor in the London Evening Standard to trumpet its first-week business at a long list of venues, mentioned neither Sevenoaks nor Tunbridge Wells (29 April 1978). As Sarah Curtis pointed out, ‘*The Stud* was distributed by Brent Walker, the leisure group who owned Focus Cinemas, so there may have been a vested interest in seeing it do well’. Sarah also noted that the manager ‘seemed keen to introduce an arthouse selection of films to attract a different sort of audience. This indicates that, based on audience knowledge, the manager felt that the audience did not just want to watch blockbusters and Disney films’.

The first booking of this type was the subtitled French romantic comedy *Cousin Cousine* (1975), which performed disappointingly. Mae Roberts noted that it ‘received one of the lowest admissions of Screen 3’s films with 255. The manager’s reaction to this outcome is surprising: rather than simply labelling the film unsuccessful and therefore a bad choice for the Focus, the manager declared *Cousin Cousine* to be “better quality” than the “ordinary ‘lower’ fare-type” (more popular) films shown in Sevenoaks. Particularly interesting is the suggestion that similar material be shown regularly, to attract more customers and to train patrons to come to see these “better” films, despite the economic implications this might have’.

The manager even suggested ‘turning one of the two small screens into a permanent art-house, plus vintage repertory, plus re-run cinema’ (11 February 1978), though this proposal does not seem to have gained much traction. Ethan Basford commented that a further French booking, *Madame Claude*

(1977), coupled with a revival of the Hollywood sex comedy *Shampoo* (1975), 'did very poorly with only 196 admissions for the entire week', which may have been 'due to a lack of interest in international pictures among the local audience'.

There had been a number of requests from local people, including members of the clergy, for a booking of *The Hiding Place* (1975), an American World War II drama set in a concentration camp. Its distributor, GTO, had not scheduled a release in the London TV area but a report opines that a Sevenoaks booking 'would be quite a "feather" in Focus's cap – and would do this Cinema a lot of good via local public relations' (14 January 1978). The manager wanted at least six weeks' advance notice of the playdate in order to promote the film through 'local church circulars and parish magazines. We want to make the most of this booking!' (4 February 1978). When GTO was slow to comply, he resorted to giving the distributor's name and address to enquirers so that they could exert further pressure (22 April 1978). The only confirmed Sevenoaks showing of the film was a full year later, when the weekly return indicated that insufficient notice had been given to circulate publicity (28 April 1979), although a solid 654 tickets were sold for Screen 2.

Among other relatively upmarket films, the Australian *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) performed creditably, whereas *Black Joy* (1977), 'a very funny and well-made picture...not unexpectedly, was something of a disappointment here' (28 January 1978). Sophie Challis asked 'why could this have been? *Black Joy* is a British film with a black cast, and storyline of a black community in the area of Brixton'. Sophie wondered if racism or merely the film's realism were factors in its poor performance in Sevenoaks (whose population, as previously noted, was predominantly White). 'Perhaps the film hadn't been talked about as much and didn't have as much interest? The fact that the manager knew it didn't do well is important as he still wanted to have it playing in the cinema and including a more inclusive array of material open to the local community'.

Holdovers, Repeat Runs and Revivals

Films that did well were often brought back for a return run after a decent interval. Examples at the Focus in this period included *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), *A Star Is Born* (1976) and *The Deep*. Although they often justified the repeat bookings with good business the second or third time around, it was nevertheless preferable to retain a film for an additional week or two on its initial run in order to maintain momentum. The manager noted: 'Re-runs do not give continuity as do hold-overs and valuable admissions are lost as a result'. He therefore suggested regularly 'booking a second and a third week in the small screens on a known and sure-fire hit' (4 February 1978).

When *Annie Hall* (1977) was booked for only a single week's run and did well despite inclement weather, the report commented that it 'should have been automatically booked for a second week in either Screen 2 or 3' (11 February 1978). When the film returned for a second run in April, following its success at the Academy Awards where it won Best Picture, it earned almost double the net of its first engagement, yet again had been booked for only a single week. A further booking was urged as soon as possible, before the local competitors got hold of it and 'whilst this picture is still warm' (8 April 1978). It was followed by a double bill of Woody Allen's *Sleeper* (1973) and *Love and Death* (1975), trailed during the second rerun of *Annie Hall*, and in December by another Allen pairing, *Bananas* (1971) and *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex* (1972), prior to a third rerun of *Annie Hall* in January 1979.

Another standard procedure was for new releases in need of a strong support to be coupled with revivals of established popular films. For example, the U.S. box-office flop *Wages of Fear* (aka *Sorcerer*, 1977) was supported by *American Graffiti* (1973), though the weekly return noted that the audience for the latter 'seemed quite diverse from the audience attracted by the [main] feature' (11 March 1978). Will Holt Price commented: 'Sevenoaks did not just show films that were current releases, as over the Christmas period [1977-78] it showed a number of more well-known films from earlier years, and it was not the only cinema in the area to do so. These films were all far past their original cinema release, so it stands to reason that they were being shown simply as a way to try and entice more patrons to the cinema during a time where admissions are naturally lower than normal. (No comments are made by the manager on this in the reports so this is purely guesswork however.) Sevenoaks was

not the only cinema in the area to be showing older films during this period, in fact, all of them did. It is therefore reasonable to assume that because business was hard during this month and the managers of each cinema had anticipated this as a result of last year's takings, they chose to show a number of films that were older that patrons would recognise and know if they like, in hopes that this would tempt more customers that way'.

Jack Earnshaw remarked that he hadn't previously realised how cinemas in this period 'actually relied quite a lot on putting on older films as a decent revenue stream'. A further possible reason for the frequency of revival showings was that such films could be booked at lower rental rates than a new release, making them an attractive option for circuit bookers, albeit one not without risk. An otherwise good week was let down by a revival of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), despite its being 'a cheap flat rate booking' (4 November 1978). This seems an odd choice, as by the time of this engagement the film had already been seen on national television, including one transmission only ten weeks before the Focus played it as an attraction in Screen 3. Ellie Scholey-Strzala commented that its failure 'must have been just as educational for the manager in understanding his audience as it was for us'.

The manager advocated reviving classic musicals in the belief that Sevenoaks was 'a good market' for the traditional genre, and he regularly pointed out when cinemas in London were playing such product. However, several attempts to stimulate interest in 'old, familiar' examples failed to pay off (12 November 1977). A double bill of *Gigi* (1958) and *Show Boat* (1951) produced only 215 admissions, one of the worst weeks for Screen 1 in the period covered by the return sheets. The report noted: 'the so-called "middle classes" or, in other words, the commuter "executive" types that are in abundance in Sevenoaks stayed away in droves' (3 December 1977).

These two films and an Elvis Presley double bill, booked for a week in Screen 3 in March 1978, had also already been shown on television and this may have exhausted the market for them. Ralph Whittall commented: 'In the report from 17 December 1977, the manager implies that broadcast television could have a major impact on a cinema's programme. The manager writes "*An American in Paris* [1951] is apparently playing BBC TV over Christmas – pity!" This would suggest that whilst the strategy of showing older, more favoured films could be profitable for a cinema, there was no point in competing with broadcast television. If a family could watch the same movie at home for free, there wasn't any point in travelling to the cinema and spending money on a ticket or confectionery items'.

Seasonal and Local Factors

Seasonal variations accounted for some of the fluctuations in business over the period. As previously noted, an expected 'pre-Christmas lull' was responsible for the failure in early and mid-December in both 1977 and 1978 of generally reliable product, such as a Clint Eastwood double bill. One report recorded: 'The town was "jam-packed solid on Saturday due quite obviously to Christmas shopping. However, they did not come to the cinema' (10 December 1977). Ralph Whittall noted that 'this seasonal obstacle' prevented the cinema 'from making as much money as would be made on a regular week', but added: 'we can also see that whilst earlier in the month the sales declined due to a pre-Christmas rush, the tide indeed turned in the latter half of the month' with the onset of the holiday period.

Grace Kilroy remarked on how 'the reports also demonstrate how the time of year and other outside influences, other than just audience tastes, are able to affect admissions and the success rate of a film shown at any given time. A perfect example of this is in the week ending 3 December 1977. Out of the three films shown that week, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* [1975] was the only one to produce a reasonable box office, although the manager comments that the number of admissions was still less than expected and therefore disappointing. The manager's notes say, however, that it would still be worth booking *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* again in a few months' time, having put down the bad numbers to the pre-Christmas lull and the extreme cold weather, believing that the film would usually have garnered more admissions had the conditions surrounding its showing been different'.

On the other hand, some programmes in this period did unexpectedly well for the time of year, with the first week of *The Rescuers* and a Gene Wilder double bill of *Young Frankenstein* (1974) and *The*

Adventure of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother (1975) producing more-than-respectable takings in the week before Christmas 1977, leading to the manager's reflection that 'it just goes to show that one cannot blame everything on the pre-Christmas lull' (24 December 1977). Against that, however, could be set the disastrous revival of *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), with only two patrons (one half-price) on Christmas Eve producing a total net for the day of £2.

The Sevenoaks cinema remained closed on Christmas Day and Boxing Day 1977, as did its competitors with the exception of the Ritz Tonbridge, which opened on 26 December to a dismal net of £19 for a revival of *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) – 'awful business and with a Disney at that!'. By contrast, the five days after Christmas earned for Focus Cinemas an 'excellent week's business – which just goes to show that we can take the money in Sevenoaks with the right product – and not an "X" in sight!'. Both the Focus and the Ritz raised their prices that week, which 'produced a few grumbles but nothing serious' (31 December 1977).

Weather could also adversely affect business, as it did with 'severe storms' and 'heavy rainfall' in January 1978, by 'snow and freezing conditions' in February (11 February 1978) and by 'arctic conditions' the following Christmas (6 January 1979), usually the peak period for business. The same situation also occurred in the summer months, when warm, sunny weather kept patrons outdoors, leading Tyler Tingle to ask: 'was the cinema competing with other cinemas or in fact the weather for customers?'.

On the other hand, rain on a Bank Holiday could be a positive boon, driving holidaymakers into the cinema (6 May 1978). Georgia Maddock commented: 'This could have played a major role in the improvements on takings from last year. Despite this, on Saturday the Cup Final was taking place, therefore a major decrease in admissions for the children's matinee and evening admissions was prominent. We can therefore not be sure whether the events taking place or the genre of film affected this week's improvements'. Noting further increased revenues later in the month, Georgia observed: 'This gives us reason to believe that Sevenoaks had improved their viewing choices to suit the target audience more effectively and that the previous week's success wasn't just a result of the bad weather and Bank Holiday'.

Cold weather didn't help a recurrent problem of draughtiness in Screen 1, which often drew public complaints, especially midweek when there were few bodies in attendance (4 February 1978). The manager opined that almost any film booked into Screen 1 was losing the cinema admissions simply because of the chilly climatic conditions (18 March 1978). Harry Goodison remarked that 'it would have been interesting to know the figures' for the Ritz Tonbridge in the week when *Golden Rendezvous* (1977) played both there and at the Focus 'and compare them against Sevenoaks' own, to see if the draughty cinema really did make an impact' or whether the film itself was responsible for the poor box office.

The state of the building itself often drew comment from the manager, who repeatedly asked head office if the faulty alarm system could be replaced and 'tatty' parts of the building refurbished (11 March 1978). There was a lack of backstage facilities for live shows and the auditoria seating and carpeting needed repair, the latter having been raised at a council inspection of the premises (27 May 1978). [JVW: *We had terrible problems – and many, many complaints - about the awful heating situation in Screen 1. The carpets left a lot to be desired as well: old, sometimes frayed and in need of repair. No wonder Rank offered this site to Focus!*]

Chloe Miller thought that 'quite a few mistakes were made during the Christmas season [1978], whether it be playing a film at a wrong time, the price of an adult ticket being printed wrongly, a shortage of programmes and even complaints of not serving hot drinks'. The latter led to a vending machine being installed in the foyer to meet this demand. Georgia Maddock concluded: 'So many factors go into the success of admissions and takings, most of which are out of the hands of managers. They can control the physical appearance of the cinema and quality of the experience they are providing as well as the genre of films shown to best suit a specific audience'. Will Holt Price concurred, adding that 'business in the cinema can be affected in a very significant way by factors far beyond their control'.

Advertising, Publicity and Promotions

A particular challenge for the cinemas was 'short dating' – that is, the tight deadlines by which future programmes were confirmed – due to the erratic booking practices of both distributors and the main circuits, Rank and ABC. Sufficient advance information was needed to arrange local publicity in a timely manner but the chain's own head office was often slow in sending programme advice, leaving the manager without confirmed details of forthcoming bookings. The manager pointed out that without this information he could not order quad posters to fill the foyer poster frames or request other publicity material in good time from National Screen Service (17 February 1979).

Television advertising for films was often targeted at the catchment area served by a particular ITV station, and the manager pointed out that Sevenoaks was in the area served by the ITV London channel rather than by Southern Television (which served most of the county). Thus any promotional material running only on the latter would not be seen by Sevenoaks patrons (22 April 1978). Conversely, advertising a film on television would only help if it was ahead of the Sevenoaks booking. A case in point was the horror film *Ruby* (1977), heavily promoted on London ITV two weeks after the Focus had played it to poor returns (2 December 1978).

One programme promoted on television, a double bill of *One on One* (1977) and *Greased Lightning* (1977), was 'an absolute disaster', which proved 'that TV doesn't necessarily sell anything!' (15 April 1978). Likewise, Ellie Scholey-Strzala observed that 'a heavy TV promotion failed to bring audiences in for *The Driver* [1978]. This is certainly food for thought as we begin to wonder what the reason for this was. Perhaps the advert was simply not very good? Or maybe it simply had not been seen as almost everyone interested at the cinema had been in attendance at the cinema watching the immensely successful *Grease* instead? I would have loved some elaboration on this from the manager or even to hear from cinema goers themselves why they chose not to see *The Driver*'. [JVW: *If people generally don't want to see a particular film, no amount of TV advertising will necessarily make a difference at the box office. Despite the foregoing, I thought Walter Hill's The Driver an excellent thriller but it was certainly grim!*]

The Focus was often the victim of untimely or inaccurate advertising organised centrally by distributors. A quad poster displayed near the cinema for the forthcoming *Annie Hall* advertised it as coming to 'a Cinema near you from Boxing Day' when the film's Sevenoaks playdate had not even been confirmed (31 December 1977); it didn't play there until February. Even local press advertising could not be relied upon. An advertisement for *Saturday Night Fever* in the *Sevenoaks Chronicle*, taken out by the film's distributor, CIC, gave an opening date one week after the commencement of the Focus's two-week run (1 April 1978). Despite this gaffe, the film was a considerable success. Similarly, *Every Which Way but Loose* (1978) did well despite the renter, Columbia-EMI-Warner, taking out a local press advertisement that failed even to mention the Sevenoaks cinemas (10 February 1979).

The manager had to ensure that the Focus featured regularly in the *Chronicle's* screen listings section but could not ensure the accuracy of the details printed: on one occasion he noted 'an absolute "b**ls-up"' of the published show times for *Grease*, which bore 'no relation whatever' to those that had been supplied (4 November 1978). Nor could he control the papers' readership. Mae Roberts noted from the returns that 'many Sevenoaks residents either did not take the local newspapers or did not read the ads, indicating that this type of advertising was not as useful as one might have thought. It is clear from the manager's comments that word-of-mouth was considered a more reliable form of promotion than newspaper and television adverts'.

Promotional activity organised at the local level by cinema staff often proved more satisfactory. Two competitions were arranged with the *Sevenoaks Chronicle* to promote *The Stud*, 'one for the film and the other for the Ronco [soundtrack] record' (15 April 1978). For an anticipated return run of *Spider-Man* (1977) in the summer holidays, a tie-in was organised with Marvel Comics, which was actually based in Sevenoaks, and a Spider-Man outfit was obtained to be worn by a willing employee (26 August 1978). [JVW: *Of course, I was very keen to do a good job and I instigated a lot of promotions, usually in cooperation with Bob Ogle, the editor of the Sevenoaks Chronicle.*]

For the delayed arrival of *Star Wars*, a children's painting competition was organised with the *Chronicle*, drawing a favourable response with over 100 entrants (27 May 1978). At the presentation of the prizes, several weeks after *Star Wars* had concluded its run, a wine reception was held for local

press representatives, guests and parents. This was 'an excellent piece of public relations' (15 July 1978), which resulted in coverage by both the *Chronicle* and the *Sevenoaks News* (22 July 1978) as well as in the trade paper *Screen International* (no. 154, 2 September 1978, p. 13). Jack Stocks commented that this was an example of 'how the cinema is interacting with their customers and hoping to gain attention from around the area'.

James Nelson remarked: 'As a result of this [competition], I can assume that the cinema then purposely screened child-safe films the following week due to the attention they likely would have received from parents reading the newspaper article on their "Star Wars Painting Competition"'. This further explains why they had a high number of admissions that week. In addition, I believe that Sevenoaks used children's films intentionally to challenge their competitive cinema rivals in the area, as they appear to only be showing films [in these weeks] that would not be suitable for children'.

Other promotions were arranged at Christmas 1978 for both *Pete's Dragon* (1977) and *Superman* (1978). Chloe Miller commented: 'This was good press for the cinema as it meant more people would come to the cinema to see the film and participate in the competition'. However, the manager's report noted that this positive publicity was 'somewhat spoilt by the coverage of the Council's decision to prosecute the company over the emergency chains affair' – details of which are regrettably not available in the surviving documents (23 December 1978). [JVW: *A member of staff failed to remove the security chains from the exit doors to one of the two mini cinemas.*]

A regular promotional tie-in was arranged with the local branch of W. H. Smith, in which the shop's manager agreed to devote one of its four display windows to posters of the week's films at the cinema. In turn, the cinema turned over unneeded display space in the foyer to advertisements for Smith's, which were often tied in with books or records linked to films (14 January 1978). Sophie Challis was struck by 'how businesses rely on the other local businesses with helping to bring in money', adding: 'we see that in the 1970s cinemas relied on local marketing' in order to 'build up a more local cinema-going community'.

Maya Lambert also remarked on the differences from film promotion today: 'In the late 1970s advertising for films was done very locally rather than presently where films are most often advertised online as well [using] social media as a big influence and promoter'. Ralph Whittall added: 'back in 1977 it took much more effort to stay in business as a cinema, with the responsibility to advertise [locally] being much more prominent'.

Admissions, Takings, Sales and Costs

As Connor Jones observed, cinema operators want to show the films 'that would give them the best chance of earning the most money'. However, even in the short period covered by the Sevenoaks returns there was considerable variance in the business done by the most and least successful programmes, resulting in what Daniel Hinchcliffe called 'an inconsistent and unpredictable rise and dip in the numbers'. [JVW: *That is the cinema business, or was then: some films inspire everyone wanting to see them, whereas others (often the 'dogs') fail to attract any audience!*]

Brett Marsden commented of the last two months in 1977: 'Something that was immediately apparent to me was how poorly the whole venue seemed to perform throughout the period in question. As previously discussed, the performance of some programmes exceeded that of others, and there is evidence to suggest that this is linked to film genre. However, according to the Sevenoaks manager, even the better performing films did not produce any spectacular level of revenue and the financial success of Focus Sevenoaks throughout those 28 days is somewhat non-existent'. [JVW: *Part of the reason for this, I suspect, was that the cinemas were badly run by my predecessor!*]

However, business improved markedly in 1978. Martha Bones remarked of the period she studied (November-December 1978): 'Despite the many risks, Sevenoaks managed to increase their net takings by 54.5% from the same period in 1977 and 92.5% from the same period in 1976. This spike in figures conveys that their advertising and general operation's approach to showing films was working well and improving as time went on'. Ellie Scholey-Strzala commented that it was 'great to see that every single week, admissions and sales were considerably higher than the same week from last year'. However, it was 'not so wonderful to see the manager discussing the need to turn away customers at

certain screenings due to there not being enough seats. The report in which this is noted is the longest one and the frustration is evident in the manager's tone'.

Although attendance could be sparse during the week, on Fridays and Saturdays it was common for people to be turned away from full houses, particularly in Screens 2 and 3 due to their limited seating capacities. This was especially true in a week of strong attractions, such as the week ending 7 October 1978, when Screen 1 was playing *The Wild Geese* (1978), Screen 2 *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) and Screen 3 the third week of *Grease*: according to the manager's report, there were almost seven capacities out of nine performances in Screen 2 and almost ten out of ten in Screen 3. The small size of the auditoria was due to the penny-pinching drop-wall conversion made by the building's previous owners, the Rank Organisation, which simply blocked off the front stalls from use. The manager commented that it was a pity that it was not possible to 'extend both cinemas into the old stalls area which is now a wasted void' (7 October 1978).

Turning people away inevitably led to both public complaints and lost revenue. Sophie Challis noted that moving Disney's *The Rescuers* from Screen 1 to Screen 2 after only two weeks at Christmas 1977 'resulted in lots of angry and frustrated patrons' and the cinema losing 'a staggering £500 in net revenue due to turning 100-150 people away every day for that week'. She quoted the manager's view that 'Sevenoaks seems to be primarily a weekend town: he wishes the cinema could "attract patronage in much greater numbers on the weekdays"'. He also mentions that 'patrons "moan and groan" about being turned away from Focus 2 and 3; however, they leave all their cinema-going till the weekend'.

When the first week of Clint Eastwood's comedy *Every Which Way but Loose* was booked into Screen 2 instead of Screen 1, the manager reported turning 200-300 people away on each Saturday night for the first two weeks, with more potential patrons being lost during the week (17 and 24 February 1979). The film ran for four weeks, giving Screens 2 and 3 some of their best business of the period. A report commented that 'Mr. Eastwood is really the only star these days who is guaranteed to draw an excellent Box Office' (24 February 1979).

Recurrent complaints from disappointed customers led the manager to take the then unusual step of selling tickets in advance for upcoming performances, a practice normally disallowed by the Focus chain. Some shows sold out in advance, leading the manager to observe: 'People in Sevenoaks are (it would seem) somewhat wise to the sizes of our seating capacities in Screens 2 and 3, and I wonder just how many did not bother to come on Saturday in their knowledge that they would probably be turned away!' (4 February 1978). In order to cope with the frequent turnaway business and to control queues, a policy of separate performances for the smaller screens was also successfully introduced instead of the then-standard continuous performances.

The number of tickets sold was not the only factor determining relative success or failure. In respect of *Logan's Run* (1976), Mae Roberts noted: 'Despite being Screen 2's second highest-attended film for the period (behind *Saturday Night Fever*'s second week), the manager considered it a failure since most of the 608 tickets sold were half-price [i.e., for children]. This demonstrates that only looking at one data point on reports such as these will not give an accurate overview of a film's performance, as while 608 admissions may make *Logan's Run* seem like one of Screen 2's most popular films, further considering its net taking of £412.02 confirms that "it didn't really make it at the box office at all"'.

Besides tickets, the cinemas also stood to earn significant revenue from theatre sales, as Connor Jones noted, 'with confectionery items, drinks and even cigarettes being a solid supplement to a lack of attendees in some weeks'. Noah Dolan commented: 'The earnings from theatre sales are surprisingly high in comparison to sales of cinema tickets'. Maya Lambert pointed out that 'there is some correlation between sales and admissions, showing that having just over 1,000 people, around £200 in sales is being made from confectionery, drinks, cigarettes and others besides tickets'.

However, as with films themselves, some shows did better than others with respect to what are now called 'concessions'. A one-day presentation of the Led Zeppelin concert film *The Song Remains the Same* (1976) earned a full house in Screen 2 but produced disappointing theatre sales, the band's fans apparently being 'awful buyers' (4 March 1978). As Harry Goodison noted, the report not only expressed regret at having limited numbers by showing the film in Screen 2, 'mentioning it would have had a better advantage if it were shown in Screen 1', but also 'disappointment in the customers not buying a

lot despite the [overall] increase in sales compared to last year'. [JVW: *The level of confectionery, soft drink and ancillary sales were in direct correlation to admissions. We very rarely got 'walk-in' sales from the street. We did not have an alcohol licence but there were three pubs within a stone's throw of the triplex!*]

Besides takings, of course the cinema also had outgoings in the form of direct costs such as film rental and stock purchases, as well as overheads like staff wages, lighting and heating. There is limited evidence of these expenses in the Sevenoaks papers, which suggests that the chain budgeted for a loss but achieved a profit position in some months at least (see the document 'Estimated Results' for the period ending 22 April 1978). The weekly returns include some data of this kind, though they are often incomplete, apparently due to the poor record-keeping of the cinemas' previous manager. Jess Campbell said of one document she studied: 'The report does provide information on the cost of wages that week – however, no information is provided for the previous year for comparison. There is also no information on the number of staff or the hours'. Connor Jones pointed out that towards the end of this period the cinemas' costs rose as 'the theatre chain had to contend with their workers rightfully getting an increase in pay due to work from their union', NATKE.

The Bigger Picture

In one of his last weekly reports for 1978, the manager noted that the Focus chain had dubbed 1979 'The Year of Progression', and enquired wryly whether this meant 'we are progressing from bad to worse, or from awareness to perfection' (9 December 1978). Such deprecation is perhaps excessive, as 1978's business in Sevenoaks registered a marked improvement on the previous year, exceeding the admissions, takings and sales figures for 1977 by a substantial margin. At least as far as May 1979, the Focus gave every sign of sustaining that growth (see Tables 10 and 11). This is when the collection of weekly return sheet ends following John Watson's transfer to another Focus house, a recently opened two-screen complex in Brentwood, Essex.

In the first half of 1978, according to Focus Cinemas' managing director Peter McRae, the chain as a whole had enjoyed its most successful ever six-month period. McRae noted that 'the first half of this year has had on release some of the biggest box office winners of all time' and looked 'forward to more of the same during the coming months' (letter to John Watson, 29 August 1978). Nationally, the picture was similarly upbeat, with 81.67 million admissions in 1978 compared to 70.17 million in 1977 (*Screen International*, 23 December 1978/5 January 1979, p. 1). The resurgence wasn't to last, however, as 1978 was the one and only year between 1946 and 1984 to see an upturn in UK cinema attendance amid a general pattern of continual decline.

Brett Marsden pointed out that 'in 1977, the UK cinema industry was damaged and in despair. For a cinema such as Focus Sevenoaks, poor business on a regular basis was likely a state of normality, as it would have been for many cinemas across Britain. The selection of films being shown would seemingly not have aided this lack of success, but that factor was also a product of the time period'. Ethan Basford concurred, arguing that 'we must also take into consideration how the 1970s was a decade of uncertainty and there were multiple factors causing a decrease in cinema admissions. There are various factors which negatively affected the British film industry in the 1970s, which included issues with funding from the government and the private sector'.

Jess Campbell added: 'It was not until the late 70s/80s that big blockbusters drew in an audience. However, by this time people were becoming more selective with what they would go to the cinema to see. This saw a massive difference between the profits made from the blockbusters and the average made by the other films shown at the time. Another factor to consider is that a huge number of cinemas were closing down, even though the cinemas still running were multiscreen. This limited the number of options when picking a venue. Not only were the options of cinemas limited but this in turn limited the range of films being exhibited'. This in turn restricted audience choice.

From the evidence available, it is not possible to define Sevenoaks' audience tastes except in the very broadest of terms. We have already noted the popularity of Disney and other family-oriented films and of those blockbusters that enjoyed countrywide success, as well as local patrons' apparent aversion to most horror pictures. Beyond that, however, it becomes hard to generalise. Chloe Miller commented:

‘From the information on the sheets, it is clear that cinemagoers in 1978 enjoyed watching a variety of different films ranging from superhero films to horror films’. Leah Park observed: ‘Looking at the given data, it goes to prove that the local cinemagoers didn’t explicitly have a “taste in films”. It often ran with what is popular rather than a specific genre and if the cinema was playing it, whether it be Sevenoaks or a competitor. It highlighted the fact that a film is a good film when it makes money’.

Certain verities remained true, however. Ellie Scholey-Strzala commented that ‘Hollywood genre cinema certainly had a hold on mainstream audiences, very much like it does today’. Emanuela Rocchi analysed all the films showing in the locality in one particular month and concluded: ‘Collecting and considering both the movies screened throughout March 1978 at the Sevenoaks and those shown by the various competing cinemas mentioned, an overwhelming majority of U.S. productions is evident. It is possible to count as many as twenty American films out of a total of 35 screened works. There are only five pictures from the United Kingdom, which represents only one sixth of the entire monthly screening in that area’. Leah Park related local programming choices and the shortage of domestically-made product to the national situation: ‘The lack of British films is not Sevenoaks’ fault, taking into account that the British industry had relied on the U.S. for financial support and when Hollywood struggled with a recession and budget cuts [in the early 1970s], this may still have had an effect in 1978’.

Mae Roberts studied a later four-week period (April 1978) and drew cautious conclusions: ‘It is interesting to compare the data for April 1978 with the data for April 1977. The overall increase in admissions could illustrate the general increase in cinema attendance in Britain towards the end of the 70s, but it would not be possible to make this assumption without first looking at data for the entire twelve-month period, or indeed the whole decade. What the available data do show, however, is a change in the pattern of attendance between the two periods. While 1978 saw high figures in the first two weeks before a sharp fall in week 3, 1977 saw a steady increase in admissions from weeks 1-4 then a drop in the final week. It would be necessary to examine the report sheets from April 1977 to ascertain whether this is due to choices made within the cinema, e.g., poor film bookings, or external factors such as changes in school term times’. [JVW: *In those days, any cinema manager was limited by what films he was able to show. Generally film bookings at Sevenoaks were tied to the release patterns determined by the renters coupled with the demands of the barring system that dominated British exhibition then, and had done since time immemorial!*]

Reflections on the Project

In this final section, comment is handed over (almost) entirely to the students, who reflect on the value of the source material for their own learning and what the project has taught them about British cinemas and the cinema business in the period studied through the Sevenoaks returns.

Grace Kilroy: ‘The data presented in the documents was extremely useful in trying to create an idea of cinema-going and audience preferences in the 1970s. The numbers provided show exactly how popular each film was, and from this it was possible to find links between the genre of the films which tended to be more or less popular overall, and from that deduce the general taste of audiences at this time. These numbers are even more useful when combined with the information provided in the manager’s notes as it presents factors which contribute to admissions numbers and adds context that is not present just from the data alone. This helped in analysing the data as in some cases when a film did poorer than expected, there were outside factors such as weather, the time of year or a lack of advertising which led to disappointing admissions for that film overall, and it was not just because of audience tastes that it didn’t do well. Another factor reflected in the data which the manager’s notes help to make apparent is that the specific town the Focus was in was a family town, which was likely the cause of why some films did worse than others, specifically horror as it wasn’t to the tastes of a town like Sevenoaks at that time.’

Brett Marsden: ‘I feel that the poor state of cinema in 1970s Britain and the effect that that would have likely had on Focus Sevenoaks can be seen in the documents and data that I have analysed. However, I am aware that the time period I have analysed may be much too short to make proper assumptions and generalisations about matters outside of said time period. Overall, the set of weekly analysis and

business reports that I have been examining have provided great insight into cinemagoing trends and viewing preferences of the 1977 population residing in Sevenoaks, Kent.'

Ralph Whittall: 'The manager's report can be incredibly helpful in understanding how the cinema industry was doing in the era.'

Will Holt Price: 'Overall it would appear that the manager's reports reveal a good amount about the Sevenoaks cinema, showing it to be a relatively successful business despite certain elements beyond the control of those in charge. These reports seem to reveal a direct correlation between the type of films shown and the amount of tickets sold, and are therefore a good way of assessing the tastes of the local cinemagoers at the time.'

Sophie Challis: 'I feel that these documents have made me think about and understand the British cinema exhibition industry in the 1970s. It has really made me think of the then and now, of the cinema experience and the things that happen behind the movie screen. Overall a great experience to be able to analyse these scattered documents of real life in the 1970s, and being able to use them as primary resources was a great opportunity.'

Rokhaya Thioub: 'It is always fascinating to take a glimpse of the past, especially taking off our eyes from big historical events and focus on the habits of people, just like us, of the time. Analysing these sheets and seeing mundane aspects of these notes is enthralling – it just goes to show that even though the notes are from decades ago, they are not different from people today.'

Mae Roberts: 'The lack of references to external factors that may have affected cinema attendance in Sevenoaks during the period is a major limitation of these documents. Other than the comments on school holidays, the manager said nothing of any events which may have influenced leisure activities. Presumably if any major occurrence had impacted the Focus the manager would have included this in a report, but the documents still do not give a complete overview of whether any poor performances were purely the result of a film's unpopularity or the impact of an outside force. They also do not paint a particularly detailed picture of the cinema's patrons beyond the brief references to age, with no mention of class, ethnicity, religion, or gender. Though the sources are limited in some ways, they still provide valuable insight into the running of the Focus Sevenoaks during this time. They are particularly useful when it comes to understanding aspects of the running of the cinema itself, such as which films were booked, why they were chosen, and by whom. These documents would be of even greater use in a wider study examining the Focus over a period of many years to better illustrate cinemagoing throughout the 1970s.'

Jess Campbell: 'To get a better understanding of the audience's taste and trends in popular cinema for Focus Cinemas would involve looking at films shown over a wider period as well as their admission numbers. Although the admissions are a good indicator of what most people were watching, there is not much information on reception. When exploring audience taste the other cinemas in the area as well as their programmes must be considered as a factor in the number of admissions. Despite the fact that TV was making it harder for cinemas to gain an audience, it is evident that there was still a need for the cinematic experience.'

Sarah Curtis: 'Primary source material can be very useful when studying the social experience of cinemagoing. The documents allow considerable insights into cinema attendance for the period. The report sheets contain numerical data for attendance, takings and expenses. There are also written reports by the manager detailing various factors affecting the week's business. The documents provide a snapshot of how a provincial cinema operated in the 1970s. The comments on the documents are both informative and interesting. Films are commodities in a marketplace and are geared to make profits and this was the manager's primary goal. Several significant points can be raised from the information contained in the documents. Whilst box-office charts focused on the top hits, other films in circulation may have been neglected. Primary source documents like the Sevenoaks reports show information which was not widely available, which highlighted different aspects of cinema going. The documents provide a valuable and detailed insight into the running of a local cinema; the community seemed quaint from today's perspective. The experience of writing the report has been rewarding and fascinating. The takeaway from the research is that 1978 was an important year in the history of British cinema. The films that tended to do well were American blockbusters and children's films, however

British-made films did attract audiences as well although on a smaller scale. The manager of Sevenoaks appeared hard-working and seemed genuinely to care how well the cinema was doing; the reports were clear and interesting to study.'

Ethan Basford: 'The admissions, sales and manager's notes all provide valuable information that assist in the analysis of this period; without them determining the patterns and nature of audiences would be impossible. It is also vital to analyse the historical context of this period and how certain factors affected cinema-going habits and the British film industry as a whole. It is important to continue to analyse the data from various cinema reports from various periods, such as these, to gain an understanding of how movie-going has changed and developed over time. By analysing the admissions, we can gain vital information regarding viewing patterns. The films which did well will communicate key ideas about taste in film, as certain genres were more successful than others. The data provided from Focus Cinemas Sevenoaks have outlined a multitude of significant ideas regarding audience patterns in the 1970s and factors which affected the state of the British film industry during this decade.'

Jade Starkie: 'Following the Focus Cinemas admissions and reports allows us to study escapism, societal tastes of the 70s and exhibition trends in the film industry. The use of the manager's reports and opposition reports gives us more of an insight into the context behind the dates and helps us focus on the topics studied.'

Jack Stocks: 'While there wasn't much information that was illegible from the original documents and there wasn't an exceptional amount missing, the information that is missing (the wages most essentially) do hinder the ability to make certain conclusions that would have been interesting to find out such as the difference in total profit the cinema had made after paying their staff, year by year. The time period we were given as a group to investigate was a quite interesting one that gave me an insight into how the cinema operated and how it has changed between then and now. I would say the most interesting and useful piece of information throughout was definitely the manager's notes, giving us a somewhat personal insight into the tactics and ideas Sevenoaks was using in order to stay relevant and ahead of their competition.'

Tyler Tingle: 'Overall, I think from the reading of the sheets we can truly see how cinemas worked in the late 1970s. We learnt what films were doing best and what films didn't do too well. We also learnt what competition the cinema had with other cinemas and what films they would show to compete in the best possible way. We also learnt what problems the cinema had and why they would lose money, which was surprisingly mostly because of the weather and not other cinemas. And finally we also got to see how the cinema would interact with its community and how they weren't just a business but actually more of a family to the customers.'

James Nelson: 'Throughout the module, I have learnt a lot about film releases and the way film distributors choose cinemas to show their films in. Ticket sales, food and beverage sales and competition with other cinemas, to name a few, were something I saw appear when looking over the data we were presented.'

Ellie Scholey-Strzala: 'Although 1978 may not seem that long ago, we must understand not all primary sources from that time will survive forever. This causes gaps in knowledge which is unfortunate but inevitable. Additionally, some of the documents were difficult to interpret due to their age and the way they had been recorded; typewriters over pre-printed forms are not as flexible as a classic pen or as legible as a modern computer. Although I see no reason for the cinema manager to bend the truth and also acknowledging his excellent attempt at recording all the relevant information regarding the cinema week to week, the lack of supporting evidence and documentation to accompany these reports causes me to question the reliability of them. Even if the manager did not consciously misinform us, could he have possibly made mistakes? [JVW: *Tut! Tut! Why would I bend the truth? What would I gain? Indeed, I reported facts, nothing else! I provided far more information regularly to head office on my returns than did other managers in the small Focus cinema circuit.*] However, these precious primary sources give us an insight into the world of cinema in 1978 that is totally unavailable in the form of secondary accounts. These preserved documents give us an authentic idea of so many different aspects of cinema at the time, from what affects audience numbers to what sort of cinema the audience of that time was interested in and why. They come from the man that knew the cinema best and the insight that that

provides us with feels wonderfully intimate and authentic. Despite certain areas of the information being illegible or difficult to understand and the reports only coming from the one individual's point of view, the documents are so full of information and do a fantastic job of educating us. It also becomes apparent that in over 40 years, the cinema-going experience has not changed as much as many may think it has.'

Daniel Hinchcliffe: 'The data gives me different sources of information telling me what movies were shown at this time and allows me to get an understanding of what movies made the cinema profit and had the most value. The data shows us what type of things cinemagoers went to go see the most and what was popular at the time. Using this data I will be able to see what the manager's intentions were and what the manager thought of how well the cinema did.'

Jack Earnshaw: 'It was very interesting interpreting these data and working out common factors between why certain films at the cinema would have been successful and why others were not. Plus, we managed to gain a greater understanding of how cinemas were run around 40 years ago compared to now. The task at hand while interesting was also quite challenging. At first glance it was hard to understand how the data was laid out and what the numbers and statistics meant. This was made even harder by how faint the [typewritten] data that we were given was. This meant that in some areas it was almost impossible to be able to read what the numbers were, and it was even more difficult to be able to read the manager's notes and the notes on opposition programmes. [JVW: *The standard weekly return form as provided by Head Office was printed on thick paper. Carbon paper to provide copies was really inefficient, but that is what we had in those days, long before laser printers and Word!*] Overall, I have learnt a lot analysing these figures and reading the management reports. I was not aware of how many factors affect the success of a cinema like this and how much thought the management must put into working out what will do well and what will fail. Weather, local demographics, star power, the effects of nostalgia and holiday times are all major elements in what make a cinema successful or not. And it is the manager's job to cater to these factors in order to garner the biggest audiences possible for the variety of films being played.'

Students participating in the project

Ethan Basford, Martha Bones, Jess Campbell, Sophie Challis, Sarah Curtis, Noah Dolan, Lauren Eady, Jack Earnshaw, Harry Goodison, Daniel Hinchcliffe, George Hopkins, Connor Jones, Grace Kilroy, Maya Lambert, Georgia Maddock, Brett Marsden, Chloe Miller, James Nelson, Leah Park, Will Holt Price, Mae Roberts, Emanuela Rocchi, Macy Savage, Ellie Scholey-Strzala, Jade Starkie, Jack Stocks, Rokhaya Thioub, Tyler Tingle, Samatha Visakha and Ralph Whittall.

NOTES

NUMBERS TO BE CORRECTED

¹ Allen Eyles, *Odeon Cinemas 2: From J. Arthur Rank to the Multiplex* (London: CTA/BFI, 2005), pp. 95-96, 111, 246.

¹ Allen Eyles with Keith Skone, *London's West End Cinemas* (Swindon: English Heritage/CTA, 2014), pp. 56-58, 183-184, 186.

¹ The films released by Brent Walker's distribution arm were identified by a perusal of the *Monthly Film Bulletin*. For background on the Brent Walker Group and its film divisions, see the interviews with George Walker, Alan Kean and Ken Dowling in *Screen International*, no. 52, 4 September 1976, pp. 15, 17. The Wikipedia entry for Brent Walker is also a useful source of general information on the company: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brent_Walker.

¹ Population figures from the 1981 census can be found at https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/admin/E10000016__kent/ and more detailed data for 2011 are at <https://www.ukcensusdata.com/sevenoaks-e07000111#sthash.PUDstzL3.dpbs>.

¹ The Stag Community Arts Centre website is at <https://stagsevenoaks.co.uk/about-us/>. The 2001 census figures for the county of Kent can be found at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/30

7939/2011_Rural-urban_statistical_classification_for_local_authorities__interim_results_-_hub_towns_.pdf.

¹ Details of Sevenoaks' demographics in 2011 can be found at <http://localstats.co.uk/census-demographics/england/south-east/sevenoaks>.

¹ *Kinematograph and Television Year Book 1969* (Fifty-fifth Year), London: Longacre Press, 1969. Allen Eyles, *ABC: the First Name in Entertainment* (London: CTA/BFI, 1993, p. 155) provides further details for the Ritz Tonbridge. Seating capacities and other details were confirmed by entries on the Cinema Treasures website at <http://cinematreasures.org/>.

¹ I have been able to fill some gaps in the programme records using local newspaper archives available online at <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

¹ See <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/41938>.

¹ The Tunbridge Wells cinema is covered in more detail, along with its previous parent company Essoldo, in Frank Mander and Charles Morris, 'A Family Business: Sol Sheckman and the Essoldo Circuit', *Picture House* no. 31, 2006.
